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Should We Abolish the Presidency?

By Barbara W. Tuchman

Owing to the steady accretion of power in the executive over the last forty years, the institution of the Presidency is not now functioning as the Constitution intended, and this malfunction has become perilous to the state. What needs to be abolished, or fundamentally modified, I believe, is not the executive power as such but the executive power as exercised by a single individual.

We could substitute true cabinet government by a directorate of six to be nominated as a slate by each party and elected as a slate for a single six-year term with a rotating chairman, each to serve for a year as in the Swiss system. The Chairman's vote would carry the weight of two to avoid a tie. (Although a five-man Cabinet originally seemed preferable when I first proposed the plan in 1968, I find that the main departments of Government, one for each member of the Cabinet, to administer, cannot be rationally arranged under fewer than six headings—see below.)

Expansion of the Presidency in the twentieth century has dangerously altered the careful tripartite balance of governing powers established by the Constitution. The office has become too complex and its reach too extended to be trusted to the fallible judgment of any one individual. In today's world no one man is adequate for the reliable disposal of power that can affect the lives of millions—which may be one reason lately for the notable nonemergence of great men. Russia no longer entrusts policy-making to one man. In China governing power resides, technically at least, in the party's central executive committee, and when Mao goes the inheritors are likely to be more collective than otherwise.

In the United States the problem of one-man rule has become acute for two reasons. First, Congress has failed to perform its envisioned role as safeguard against the natural tendency of an executive to become dictatorial, and equally failed to maintain or even exercise its own rights through the power of the purse.

It is clear, moreover, that we have not succeeded in developing in this country an organ of representative democracy that can match the Presidency in positive action or prestige. A Congress that can abdicate its right to ratify the act of war, that can obediently pass an enabling resolution on false information and remain helpless to remedy the situation afterward,

is likewise not functioning as the Constitution intended. Since the failure traces to the lower house—the body most directly representing the citizenry and holding the power of the purse—responsibility must be put where it belongs: in the voter. The failure of Congress is a failure of the people.

The second reason, stemming perhaps from the age of television, is the growing tendency of the Chief Executive to form policy as a reflection of his personality and ego needs. Because his image can be projected before fifty or sixty or 100 million people, the image takes over; it becomes an obsession. He must appear firm, he must appear dominant, he must never on any account appear "soft" and by some magic transformation which he has come to believe in, he must make history's list of "great" Presidents.

While I have no pretensions to being a psychohistorian, even an ordinary citizen can see the symptoms of this disease in the White House since 1960, and its latest example in the Christmas bombing of North Vietnam. That disproportionate use of lethal force becomes less puzzling if it is seen as a gesture to exhibit the Commander in Chief ending the war with a bang, not a whimper.

Personal government can get beyond control in the U.S. because the President is subject to no advisers who hold office independently of him. Cabinet ministers and agency chiefs and national security advisers can be and are—as we have lately seen—hired and fired at whim, which means that they are without constitutional power. The result is that too much power and therefore too much risk has become subject to the idiosyncrasies of a single individual at the top, whoever he may be.

Spreading the executive power among six eliminates dangerous challenges to the ego. Each of the six would be designated from the time of nomination as secretary of a specific department of Government affairs, viz:

(1) Foreign, including military and C.I.A. (Military affairs should not, as at present, have a Cabinet-level office because the military ought to be solely an instrument of policy, never a policy-making body.)

(2) Financial, including Treasury, taxes, budget, and tariffs.

(3) Judicial, covering much the same as at present.

(4) Business (or Production and Trade), including Commerce, Transportation and Agriculture.

(5) Physical Resources, including Interior, Parks, Forests, Conservation, and Environment Protection.

(6) Human Affairs, including H.E.W., Labor and the cultural endowments.

It is imperative that the various executive agencies be incorporated under the authority of one or another of these departments.

Cabinet government is a perfectly feasible operation. While this column was being written, the Australian Cabinet, which governs like the British by collective responsibility, overrode its Prime Minister on the issue of exporting sheep to China, and the West German Cabinet took emergency action on foreign exchange control.

The usual objection one hears in this country that a war emergency requires quick decision by one man seems to me invalid. Even in that case, no President acts without consultation. If he can summon the Joint Chiefs, so can a Chairman summon his Cabinet. Nor need the final decision be unilateral. Any belligerent action not clearly enough in the national interest to evoke unanimous or strong majority decision by the Cabinet, ought not to be undertaken.

How the slate would be chosen in the primaries is a complication yet to be resolved. And there is the drawback that Cabinet government could not satisfy the American craving for a father-image or hero or superstar. The only solution I can see to that problem would be to install a dynastic family in the White House for ceremonial purposes, or focus the craving entirely upon the entertainment world, or else to grow up.

Barbara W. Tuchman is a Pulitzer-Prize-winning historian. Her latest book is "Stilwell and the American Experience in China."